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**A House Divided (24): That Peculiar
Institution - III**

Lead: One hundred and fifty years ago the Republic was facing its greatest crisis. This continuing series examines the American Civil War. It is "A House Divided."

Intro: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: By 1850, slavery so dominated the national conversation that few national matters of policy could be discussed without reference to this peculiar institution. To mollify Southern demands, The Compromise

of 1850 included a much more severe fugitive slave regime. Rejecting Northern attempts to provide basic rights such as habeas corpus or a jury trial, the law put the onus of proof on the accused escapee and then gave the slave no mechanism for proving their status. The law established Federal commissioners before whom slavers could bring fugitives to circumvent uncooperative anti-slavery local courts. If a commissioner decided for the slave he received five dollars, if he decided for the owner, he received ten dollars, presumably to facilitate the paperwork needed to remand the slave back South.

Federal marshals were levied huge fines if they did not help owners get

their slaves back. And there was no time limit to the slaves' standing, no statute of limitations. Former slaves, some living in freedom for years, were liable for snatching. In the North, this enterprise was seen to significantly tip the scales of justice in favor of slave owners. The returns of justice seem to endorse that assumption. The number of slaves sent back South markedly increased in the months that followed the passage of the new law. For Southerners, it seemed that at last a federal law, with real teeth, was addressing their demands. Their victory proved a pyrrhic one. Any Southern satisfaction soon turned sour, however, because the new fugitive slave system aroused such hostility in the North that any gains for

the South proved illusory, offset by implacable opposition in the North.

In Richmond Virginia, this is Dan Roberts.

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